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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002782

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: NINEWA: CHRISTIANS RELATIVELY SECURE IN BARTALLAH  
BUT COMPLAIN OF SHABAK ENCROACHMENT

REF: BAGHDAD 276

Classified By: Ninewa PRT Team Leader Jason Hyland: 1.4 (B) and (D)

This is a Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

SUMMARY

1. (C) Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Leader Hyland and other PRT members, along with the 4-1 Brigade Combat Team Chaplain, August 18 visited Bartallah, a majority Christian town in the northern Iraqi province of Ninewa, part of the historic Iraqi Christian heartland. Local Christian politicians and a priest said a local Christian security force, with support from the Kurdish Peshmerga militia and Assayish intelligence service, keeps the roughly 13,500 Christians in the town relatively safe. However, the leaders complained of encroachment and harassment by Shabak, a minority Shi'a sect who they say are trying to push the Christians off their land in the countryside surrounding Bartallah. Despite these complaints, the Christian leaders said they remain deeply committed to the nation of Iraq.

Private Guards Protect Town

2. (C) Christian leaders described the 500-man private security force of motivated young local Christian men that guards their neighborhoods in Bartallah, a town in the Christian heartland of the Ninewa Plain region east of Mosul. The leaders included Assistant Governor Yousif Lalo, three members of the Bartallah local council, a manager of the security force, the mayor of nearby Tel Kaif, and the parish priest of the town's minority Assyrian Catholic church. The guard force is armed with AK-47s and employs check points, guard shacks and razor wire to define and control their area of responsibility. Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) Finance Minister Sarkis Aghajan, an internationally respected Christian philanthropist, finances the force. The parish priest said the Christian community also benefits from Kurdish Peshmerga and Assayish presence in the area.

3. (C) Despite four years of war, the town market just outside the guarded zone seemed vibrant August 18, with Christian leaders saying that both Christians and Shabak shop at the town's market. (Note: The priest expressed concern to the PRT Leader that because the market is outside the guarded perimeter of town there is the risk of a terrorist bombing there.) Estimates of the Christian population of Bartallah itself range from 12,000 to 15,000, or about 80 to 85 percent of the town's residents, according to the leaders.

Tensions With Shabak Over Land

4. (C) While the Christians' private security force provides basic security inside Bartallah, the leaders repeated earlier

complaints that long-standing land disputes with Shabak in the surrounding countryside lead to frequent, and sometimes violent, confrontation. The leaders complained that most of the town's executive officials are Muslims - appointed by Coalition Forces in 2003 - who disadvantage the Christians in several areas of essential services and security, including police operations, electricity provision, and court decisions.

15. (C) Looking to the future, the Christian leaders said it would be impossible to work with the Shabak to find common ground. Instead, they said the Christians should be allowed to establish a zone within the town of Bartallah that would be a solely Christian preserve, where they could practice their religion and traditions in peace. The leaders said they have never met - and had not interest in meeting - the area's senior Shabak leaders to discuss land ownership and security issues, though three Christian politicians share half of the seats on Bartallah's subdistrict council with Shabak.

#### Leaders Support Article 140 Process

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16. (C) The Christian leaders said they look forward to the full implementation of the Article 140 process, for which they are willing to wait up to two years. The leaders expressed mixed sentiments about whether the local Christian community would choose to join the KRG. Several leaders said they would prefer to remain full citizens in a multi-sectarian Iraq, albeit one in which they are given "fair" and "just" treatment, including the return of lands transferred to Muslim control under Saddam Hussein's regime. Some leaders also suggested Christians use the Article 125

BAGHDAD 00002782 002 OF 002

in Iraq's constitution (Note. Article 125 guarantees the the "administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights" of Iraq's various groups, including Christians. End Note.) to justify the creation of a semi-autonomous local administrative region.

#### COMMENT

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17. (C) While the PRT regularly visits Bartallah and other Christian communities as part of overall PRT outreach, we wanted also to confirm this minority Christian community's security situation in the wake of the August 14 attacks on the minority Yazidi community of western Ninewa. Even though the Bartallah Christians are locked in low-intensity local competition with Shabak over land ownership and cultural assimilation, the greater concern is that their location on a fault line between KRG and Arab control could make them a target for a major terrorist attack. The Christian security force seems sufficient to protect the community from its neighbors, but has not been tested against a wider radical Sunni Arab threat.

18. (C) Even as the Bartallah Christians outline their grievances, the Shabak make counter claims of harassment and intimidation by the Christians (reftel). PRT will continue to work with the two communities to build a local capacity that encourages cooperation in governance and security. In one initiative, which we will report septel, the PRT is exploring support for an agro-business project in Bartallah that would encourage participation from - and ultimately benefit - both the Christian and Shabak communities.

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